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ABSTRACT

There are no good figures on the number of limited English speakers who are also illiterate in their native languages. This data is worth having because there is research indicating that literacy in the native language plays an important role in the acquisition of oral English and the development of English literacy. This digest reviews recent research related to the role of native language literacy and describes program types and instructional approaches that incorporate learners' languages into instruction. Headings in this digest include the following: rationale for native language and literacy development; factors influencing native language literacy instruction; program models; and instructional approaches. It is concluded that adult English language learners come to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs with a variety of experiences with education, literacy, and English. They also come with many strengths embedded in their language, culture, and experiences. By incorporating learners' native languages, programs have the potential to draw upon these strengths in facilitating their learning of English and becoming literate in their native language and in English. Fifteen references are included. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Native Language Literacy and Adult ESL Instruction

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Estimates based on data from the 1990 census and on the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) suggest that approximately 12-14 million adults in the United States have limited proficiency in English (Wagner & Venezky, 1999). Unfortunately, the NALS did not provide estimates as to the number of adults who, in addition to English language services, also need literacy instruction. There are also no reliable figures about the levels of literacy that adult English language learners have in their native languages (Wiley, 1994). Yet, evidence from research conducted with adults in the United States in recent years and data derived from programs serving adult English language and literacy learners indicate the positive role that literacy in the native language plays in the acquisition of oral English and the development of English literacy (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994, 1996; Gillespie, 1994; Rivera, 1990, 1999a, 1999b; Solórzano, 1994; Wrigley, 1993). This digest reviews recent research related to the role of native language literacy and describes program types and instructional approaches that incorporate learners' languages into instruction.

Rationale for Native Language and Literacy Development

Research conducted with adults in the United States in recent years shows that reading in the native language aids the acquisition of and reading ability in a second language. A study conducted with adult learners from diverse language backgrounds such as Spanish, Cambodian, and Korean suggests that these learners may benefit from their native language literacy skills because there is a transfer in basic reading skills from the first to the second language irrespective of the scripts involved (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994; Wagner and Venezky, 1999).

This research supports evidence derived from practice in adult education programs (Auerbach, 1996; Gillespie, 1994; Rivera, 1990, 1999b) and from research conducted with children (Thomas & Collier, 1997) that first language literacy development is strongly related to successful second language learning and academic achievement, and that literacy skills developed in the native language transfer to the second language.

The report of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998) may be relevant to adults as well. The authors, all prominent educators and reading researchers, recommended that whenever possible, bilingualism and biliteracy should be promoted as it provides intellectual, economic, and social benefits. Furthermore, the use of the native language aids in the meaning-making process by allowing learners to read words they know and sentences they understand, to use context effectively, and to self-correct efficiently.

More needs to be known about the strategies that those who are literate in their native language apply when learning a second language. A review of the literature on adult second language reading by Carlo and Skilton-Sylvester (1996) shows that language and literacy background influence both lower level processes, such as recognizing letters, and higher level processes, such as accessing prior knowledge about text structure when reading in the second language. Evidence from the 1994 study conducted by the same researchers is consistent with the notion that reading skills are interdependent across languages. Therefore, providing instruction that strengthens native language reading skills can have a positive impact on the development of second language reading skills (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994).

Factors Influencing Native Language Literacy Instruction

Attitudes of teachers' and program developers' towards languages other than English in U.S. society and the role that the native language plays in second language learning and literacy development affect pedagogical approaches and, ultimately, the way that learners' native languages are acknowledged and included in adult education programs. Since the 1970s, adult native language literacy programs in the United States have been a grassroots phenomenon, initiated at the program level and innovative in nature (Gillespie, 1994). Because 55% of adult ESL learners are Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), most programs are offered in Spanish, although programs are also offered in other languages such as Haitian Kreyól and Hmong (Gillespie, 1994; Wrigley, 1993).

Recent changes in welfare, immigration, and citizenship policies have affected the ability of programs to offer instruction in the native language. Because of the limited amount of time that students are allowed to remain in adult education programs before obtaining employment, there is pressure to offer instruction exclusively in English. In addition, the degree to which a program uses the native language of learners in instruction is not only the result of educational goals and funding policies. It also depends on the availability of personnel who speak the native languages of the students, the number of different native languages spoken in the program, and the availability of curriculum materials in these languages.

Program Models

Several native language program models for adult English language and literacy learners have been documented in the literature. Programs can offer concurrent or subsequent native language and ESL services (Rivera & Rabideau, 1992). Models

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that are *concurrent* in nature can be bilingual, in which literacy in the native language and ESL are taught alongside, usually by a bilingual teacher; or *coordinate*, in which one instructor teaches ESL and another in the native language. In the *sequential or subsequent* model, students stay in native language literacy classes until they reach a threshold level of reading in the native language, and then they take ESL classes (Gillespie, 1994; Rivera, 1990). Native language literacy programs can have different goals. While some programs explicitly state biliteracy – the development of literacy in both languages – as a goal, others develop literacy in the native language only in order to aid English language acquisition and English literacy. (For additional program models, see Rivera and Rabideau, 1992).

Adult education programs that do not offer native language instruction but that aim to teach English language and literacy may use learners' native languages as instructional support in a variety of ways. Some programs do not explicitly teach in the native language, but use it for content area instruction, such as for health, immigration, or pre-employment preparation classes and counseling. Others use it at beginning ESL levels to help students with basic vocabulary, concept knowledge development, and semantic and syntactic understanding.

Instructional approaches

Instructional approaches vary depending on underlying theories and beliefs about the development of language and literacy and the program model in which they take place. Programs that emphasize the importance of meaning place learners' native language and cultural background and experiences at the center of the educational program, using them for instruction. For example, some programs use student-generated materials for teaching and learning. At El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City, students learned to read and write both in their native language (Spanish) and in English by engaging in projects that were meaningful to them. These projects comprised a theme-based curriculum for literacy and ESL classes. This type of approach makes literacy accessible to learners by connecting their oral language, culture, and experience to meaningful literacy activities. In one of the projects, students edited and produced a video documenting their experiences working in the garment industry. This project allowed them to use and develop both Spanish and English language and literacy skills (Rivera, 1999b). In other, more traditional ESL programs, literacy is taught in sets of isolated skills, not necessarily connected to learners' experiences or knowledge (Wrigley, 1993).

Conclusion

Adult English language learners come to programs with a variety of experiences with education, with literacy, and with English. They also come with many strengths embedded in their language, culture, and experiences. By incorporating learners' native language, programs have the potential to draw upon these strengths in facilitating their learning English and becoming literate in their native language and in English.

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